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Chile: Plebiscite Results

President Pinochet's position has been temporarily strengthened by his 2-to-1 victory in the constitutional plebiscite held on 11 September. The referendum aroused opponents of the military regime, however, and unless Pinochet is able to undercut them he may in time face vigorous domestic opposition.

Pinochet's immediate gains are striking. His direct military rule is confirmed until 1989, and he then has the option of running for an eight-year term as a civilian. Opposition leaders who had urged a "no" vote or boycott appear discredited--93 percent of the electorate turned out and 67 percent approved the constitution and transition articles. Many military moderates will be pleased that a definite timetable for a return to civilian rule has been established.

By lending an aura of legitimacy to Pinochet's regime for the first time in its seven-year history, the plebiscite enhances his international image. The absence of violence and the massive voter turnout will make it easier for Pinochet to ignore foreign critics of the plebiscite.

The government, however, may confront some unexpected results. The plebiscite has rallied and partially unified opposition groups that had been dormant or were perennial adversaries. In the largest antiregime gathering since the 1973 coup, tens of thousands of moderates and Marxists turned out for a speech denouncing the plebiscite by Christian Democratic leader Eduardo Frei. The plebiscite also may have given the Christian Democrats and the Communist Party the impetus to renew past efforts to form a working relationship.

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The plebiscite further damaged church-state relations, which were already strained by recent government actions to halt renewed terrorism. Chilean church leaders spoke out against the plebiscite for failing to offer voters a reasonable alternative to continued military rule. [REDACTED]

Pinochet could defuse much of the criticism if he takes advantage of his newly strengthened position to make concessions to mollify moderate opponents of the regime. For example, he could increase civilian representation in his cabinet, which is currently being reorganized, and thus move closer to the joint military-civilian transitional government advocated by Frei. [REDACTED]

The President's past record, however, indicates he is not likely to capitalize on this opportunity. His limited steps toward reform and liberalization have come only when he felt he was under pressure. For example, Pinochet delayed suppressing the notorious security agency until regime moderates forced him to act in 1977. Similarly, he restored labor rights only when faced with an international boycott of Chilean shipping in 1979. Pinochet, in fact, stalled on putting the constitution itself to a vote until increased domestic discontent related to the revival of terrorism convinced him the regime needed a shot in the arm. [REDACTED]

Unless Pinochet appears willing to compromise, the long-term effect of the plebiscite may be to stimulate, rather than undercut, the opposition. Opposition leaders are now faced with a constitutional arrangement guaranteeing eight to 16 more years of Pinochet rule and may conclude they have little to lose by stepping up antiregime activities. Although most will initially concentrate on peaceful means, frustration could eventually drive some to violence. [REDACTED]

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